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(WASHINGTON, DC) -- Today, Congressman Russ Carnahan (MO-3) offered and passed an amendment to H.R. 1429, the Improving Head Start Act of 2007. Carnahan's amendment allows Head Start grantees to negotiate a funded enrollment level with the HHS Secretary if funding for the program does not keep pace with inflation.

"Studies have shown that Head Start children experience increased achievement test scores, lower incidence of grade repetition, reduced special education needs and higher graduation rates. My amendment gives Head Start grantees the ability to preserve the quality of their local programs," Carnahan said.

Over the past three years, Head Start and Early Head Start have experienced an estimated 8 percent real decline, adjusted for inflation, in federal funding from fiscal year 2002 through fiscal year 2007. This decline in funding has required already efficient Head Start agencies across the country to tighten their belts even more. Sadly, local agencies are now forced to pass these cuts onto quality staff, forcing our local agencies to make the worst in managerial choices. By default, agencies are unable to compete for the best and brightest of the early childhood educators, thus risking the quality of Head Start programs.

After consultation with some of the brightest business leaders in the area, our local agencies have taken extraordinary steps to conserve costs and maximize efficiencies. Even with these steps, agencies are unable to keep staff compensation in line with inflation increases, both in wages and health insurance. Programs in St. Louis and across the country are at a serious risk of losing quality staff due to this critical situation.

The Carnahan amendment gives HHS the discretion to determine whether or not individual agencies have explored all possible solutions prior to requesting reduced enrollment. Head Start programs should have the right to request reduced enrollment levels only when they have taken all appropriate steps to achieve efficiency first.

"Congressman Carnahan's amendment has been tremendously important to ensuring the continued high quality of Head Start programs. Head Start has been challenged by funding losses as inflationary costs increase. Programs have responded by maximizing cost efficiencies, but there was previously no mechanism for adjusting enrollment expectations as costs rise and funding drops, which has jeopardized the quality of services. Thanks to Congressman Carnahan, the House bill now assures that each child and family receiving Head Start services will get the full range of quality services they need and deserve," said Jim Braun, President and CEO of Youth in Need, an organization that provides Head Start services to families in Eastern Missouri, including over 400 families in the city of St. Louis.

The amendment is supported by Representative George Miller, Chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, the National Education Association (NEA), and the National Head Start Association (NHSA) has indicated their support for the spirit of the amendment.